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Building for the Future: Rosenwald Schools in Warren County

By Donna Parker

Julius Rosenwald (1862-1932)

Julius Rosenwald, merchant and philanthropist, was born in Springfield, Illinois, August 12, 1862, son of German Jewish immigrants Samuel and Augusta Rosenwald. In 1879 Julius moved to New York City to learn the clothing business from his uncles, eventually opening his own establishment in Chicago. In 1895 Rosenwald invested \$75,000 in Sears, Roebuck and Company. The following year he became vice-president. He pioneered the field of mail-order merchandising and turned the company into a retail giant. Rosenwald succeeded Richard Sears as president in 1908.

Rosenwald's philanthropic interests were numerous. Many of his gifts were bestowed through the Julius Rosenwald Fund established in 1917 for the "well-being of mankind." Rosenwald was particularly interested in rural and agricultural development, better education for African Americans and improved race relations. His School Building Program provided seed money to build over 5,000 African American schools, shops and teacher's homes across the southern United States. Julius Rosenwald died in Chicago January 6, 1932.

Before school consolidation and bus transportation, most southern rural communities had a one-room schoolhouse in which to educate their youth. As local school boards built larger and more modern structures, the small schools were generally closed, sold and abandoned. In 2002 the National Trust for Historic Preservation placed a special group of these buildings – the Rosenwald Schools – on its list of the Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places.

The idea of constructing schools for African American children across the southern United States was spawned from a partnership between philanthropist Julius Rosenwald and African American educator Booker T. Washington, president of Tuskegee Institute. Rosenwald, inspired by Washington's theory of "self-help," visited Tuskegee in 1911. Washington believed that through education and training blacks could achieve economic progress and eventually social equality. Rosenwald gave Washington \$25,000 for the advancement of black education. Washington used \$2,100 of the gift to build six rural schoolhouses in Alabama. Impressed with the project Rosenwald gave another gift of \$30,000 for the construction of 100 additional schools. After Washington's death in 1915 Rosenwald continued the project establishing the Julius Rosenwald Fund.

Julius Rosenwald used the great wealth he had amassed from his association with Sears, Roebuck and Company to further his many philanthropic causes. The Julius Rosenwald Fund was incorporated in 1917 to "receive and disperse funds" for the "well-being of mankind." The primary focus of the Fund for its first ten years of existence was the School Building Program, a cooperative effort with southern states, local school

districts and private citizens to build schoolhouses for African American children.

Approximately one-third of its \$13.75 million total expenditure supported this project.

Headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee, the Fund provided seed money to communities that met certain stipulations and where the Fund felt the project would be successful. Community members had to show an interest in educating their youth and make matching contributions in the form of money, labor or materials. Enough land had to be provided for a playground and agricultural work if necessary. The school became the property of the local school board which was required to equip, furnish and maintain the schoolhouse. A major objective of the program was to encourage citizens and local governments to accept full responsibility in satisfying local needs.

The Rosenwald Fund provided floor plans, drawn by Tuskegee professors, to grant recipients. One-hundred-and-four of Kentucky's 155 Rosenwald Schools followed the one- or two-teacher model. Plans were also available for up to a 12-teacher facility. Designed to improve the education of children, these modern buildings were spacious and well-lit with banks of windows providing adequate ventilation and lighting in the classrooms. The larger schools had auditoriums and shops with many of the smaller facilities housing community rooms. The Fund also provided plans for teacher's homes, workshops, and even a privy.

Between 1917 and 1920 Kentucky built its first 33 Rosenwald Schools in 25 counties. Logan County's Russellville School, a seven-teacher facility, was the second largest constructed during this period. In all, Kentucky received grants to build 155 schools, 2 teacher's homes, and 1 shop for 18,090 students and 402 teachers in 64

counties. African Americans contributed 16.64% of the total cost with whites giving 4.27%, public funding 63.73%, and the Rosenwald Fund 15.36%.

In 1920, Warren County's children were educated in 99 schools, seventeen of which were African American. The seventeen were predominately frame structures faced with vertical boarding. At least three were clapboard and one log. The county's first Rosenwald School opened July 16, 1923 in the Cox Springs District. The two-teacher facility, located on lower Tenth Street outside the western edge of Bowling Green, had two classrooms measuring 22'x30', each with its own entrance and vestibule, two cloakrooms and a 12'x12' community room. Under the tutelage of local African American leader and educator Reverend H.D. Carpenter, the former Cox Springs School, commonly known as the "Carpenter School," is thought to be the oldest African American school in the county. No doubt, Reverend Carpenter was a driving force behind the initiative to build what is now known as the Delafield school. Rosenwald trustee and Peabody Provost Emeritus Samuel L. Smith attended Warren County's August 1923 teacher's meeting. Smith directed the Fund's southern office in Nashville and acted as consultant to grant recipients in school planning and construction. Delafield cost \$4,000 to construct with contributions as follows: African American \$500; public funding \$2,800; and Rosenwald \$700.

Rosenwald funds aided in the construction of two additional schoolhouses in Warren County - one in Rockfield (1926-27) and one at Bristow (1928-29). Both schools were one-teacher facilities. Two plans were available for this size school but both had a 22'x30' classroom, two cloakrooms, and one community room. The Rockfield School is still standing and has been adapted into a dwelling. African Americans contributed 23%

of the total cost of the \$2,560 Rockfield school. Public monies totaled \$2,100 with the Rosenwald grant adding \$400. Contractor G.H. Tabor constructed the Bristow School in 1928 at a total cost of \$1,750. African Americans contributed \$100, public funding \$1,450 and Rosenwald \$200. Prudence Emery continued there as teacher.

The Rosenwald Fund also gave dollars to aid in bus transportation of African American schoolchildren. Though it is not known whether Warren County received any of this money, the school board did have transportation contracts with at least three individuals in 1928 to transport African American students to school. Lucy L. King received the contract for the route from Plum Springs to the “Bristow colored school”; Westerfield Cole to the “Delafield colored school” and Hughey Heater from Plano to the “Richpond colored school.”

Many communities in the south celebrated “Rosenwald Day,” a day instituted to “re-arouse community interest in schools, to clean up and beautify the school buildings and grounds, and often to raise collections for needed repairs or additions to equipment.” One Warren County school, most likely Delafield, reported celebrating Rosenwald Day in 1932. Two teachers, 105 students, and 25 citizens were present at the meeting.

Julius Rosenwald’s philosophy of giving did not include the idea of a perpetual endowment. He felt that the current generation could not know or anticipate the needs of the future one. Therefore, when he established the Julius Rosenwald Fund, he made the stipulation that all monies be expended within 25 years of his death. Rosenwald also felt citizens, governments and other public agencies should accept full responsibility for community need. Julius Rosenwald died on January 6, 1932. The School Building Fund ended that same year, not for a lack of need, but because trustees deemed additional aid

would delay southern states in assuming due responsibility. During the twenty years of the School Building Program, 5,357 public schools, shops and teacher's homes were built in 883 counties of 15 southern states at a total cost of \$28,408,520 with \$4,366,519 contributed by the Julius Rosenwald Fund. True to their charge, Trustees totally expended the Fund by 1948.